

The Historical and Scientific Society  
of



SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND DISCOVERIES OF  
ROBERT CAMPBELL

CHIEF FACTOR OF THE HON. HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY

BY

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A Life Member of the Society



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**CHIEF FACTOR ROBERT CAMPBELL**

Discoverer of the Upper Yukon

# SKETCH OF THE LIFE AND DISCOVERIES OF ROBERT CAMPBELL

Chief Factor of the Hon. Hudson's Bay Company

The Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba met in the City Hall, Winnipeg, on the evening of April 14th, 1898. A large audience had assembled to hear the papers of the evening. Chief Factor William Clark, President of the Society, occupied the Chair. The first paper of the evening was read by Rev. Dr. Bryce, a life member of the Society, on the "Life and Discoveries of the late Chief Factor Robert Campbell. A large map, prepared by Bulman Bros., was used in following the interesting account of the explorations of the distinguished discoverer on Liard River, Dease Lake, the Upper Stikine, and the Upper Yukon rivers. Dr. Bryce said as follows :

More than twenty-six years ago, the writer remembers as one of the first men he met in Red River Chief Factor Robert Campbell, the discoverer of the Upper Yukon River, which is the goal of so many gold seekers to-day. Robert Campbell was a natural leader of men. His tall, commanding figure, sedate bearing, and yet shrewd and adaptable manner, singled him out as one of the remarkable class of men who in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company governed an empire by their personal magnetism, and held many thousands of Indians in check by their honesty, tact and firmness.

Robert Campbell, like so many of the Hudson's Bay Company's officers and men, was of Scottish origin, and was born, the son of a considerable sheep farmer, in Glenlyon, Perthshire, Scotland, on the 21st of February, 1808. Having received a fair education in his native glen, which was further carried on in the City of Perth, he was led by Sir George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, to come to the Red River in 1832 to superintend the sheep farm being started by the Company at St. James Parish, on the Assiniboine River, a few miles west of the City of Winnipeg of to-day.

The Hudson's Bay Company at this time seems to have been in earnest in endeavoring to promote the development of the Red River as a farming country. That they succeeded so poorly is probably the reason that they afterwards settled down to the erroneous belief, expressed so decidedly by Sir George Simpson in the investigation by the Imperial Parliament in 1857, that agriculture could not be successfully carried on in the country.

The period beginning with 1830 or 1831 was one of great activity at Red River. Sir George Simpson threw himself with great vigor into projects for developing the country. We can do little more than mention them. Indeed, they need little more than mention, for they ended in failure.

(1) The Buffalo Wool Company, a wild scheme to manufacture cloth from buffalo's wool and to tan the hides for leather. An absolute loss of upwards of £6,000 sterling gave the promoters serious cause for reflection.

(2) Sir George promised to take all the Company's supplies from the colony; but he was disappointed by the carelessness and discontent of the people.

(3) An experimental farm was begun on the Assiniboine near the farm since known as Lane's farm. After six years of effort the farm failed, having cost the Company £3,500 sterling.

(4) A farm for growing flax and hemp. The flax grew and the hemp grew, but they rotted in the fields; while a costly flax mill to manufacture the product fell into decay.

(5) Sheep from Kentucky. Governor Simpson determined to introduce the care of sheep as an industry suitable to the country. A joint stock company was formed. £1,200 was raised, and the enterprise was begun with high hopes. It was in connection with this scheme that Robert Campbell came to the country. In charge of the enterprise was a gentleman of the Hudson's Bay Company, by name, H. Glen Rae. With him was associated John P. Bourke, one of the Irish immigrants who had come with Lord Selkirk's first party. Bourke was a man of education, had served the Company well, and was well fitted for the task assigned him. In 1833, Rae, Bourke and four

others, one of whom was Robert Campbell, crossed the plains to Missouri to purchase sheep for the new company. Dissatisfied with the excessive charges of the Missourians, Rae insisted on going on to Kentucky, 500 miles further. The sheep were bought at a price of \$1.00 to \$2.00 a head, and a party started with them for the Red River. The journey was most disastrous. Foot sore and wearied, many of the sheep died by the way. Pierced by the spear grass (*Stipa spartea*) many perished; the the leaders of the party quarrelled; the flock became steadily



FORT SIMPSON (Mackenzie River)

less; and of 1475 sheep bought in Kentucky only 251 reached Red River.

(6) Other unsuccessful schemes, such as the Tallow Company, followed this, but Campbell was sent away to the far west, and exchanged the peaceful role of shepherd for that of a trader.

### CAMPBELL AS A FUR TRADER.

Robert Campbell had from the first the confidence of Sir George Simpson, and now the Governor despatched him to what seems to have been the favorite hunting grounds of the early traders, the Mackenzie River basin. In 1834 he was at Fort

Simpson, and at once took his place as a daring and hardy explorer of new ground. In 1834 he volunteered to establish a post at the head waters of a tributary of the Mackenzie and his offer was accepted. Leaving Fort Simpson, which is on an island in the Mackenzie River, and near the junction of that river with the Liard, he ascended the latter river, which was also known as Mountain River, reached Fort Liard, nearly two hundred miles from the junction, and passed on as much further to Fort Halkett, which is built among the mountains. In the winter of 1837, the ardent explorer went on three or four hundred miles, enduring great hardships, and in the spring of 1838 succeeded in doing what his predecessors had tried in vain to accomplish, viz., established a Hudson's Bay Company's post on Dease Lake at the source of the wild mountain stream. In the summer of that year the intrepid adventurer crossed to the Pacific slope and reached the head waters of the Stikine River. Indeed, he spent this and the following year in journeys of the most daring kind, in ascending and descending the fierce mountain streams of the Rocky Mountain divide.

### **TERRIBLE HARDSHIPS.**

The winter of 1838-9 was to the explorer one of the greatest trial. The writer has heard the great explorer descant on the adventures of that eventful year. A new post had been erected by Campbell to advance the fur trade, and the energy of the trader awakened the hatred of the Secatqueonays, a tribe who, with their allies, numbered about six thousand souls. These Indians lived at the mouth of the Stikine River, and they were in the habit of going inland for one hundred and fifty miles to trade at a great village mart, which was only sixty miles from Campbell's new fort on Dease's Lake. At this time the trader and his men nearly reached starvation. They were so reduced in supplies that they subsisted for some time on the skin thongs of their moccasins and snowshoes, and on the parchment windows of their huts boiled up to supply the one meal a day which kept them alive. Early in the year 1840 the explorer crossed to the western side of the mountains, and

descending from the head waters of the Stikine, explored this river for a distance. The Indians, hostile to him on account of the energy which he displayed, took him and his party prisoners. The daring party, however, escaped, it has been reported, after having almost met death, and having to chop down a bridge, to prevent the pursuing Indians from overtaking them. Campbell's life was only saved by the bravery and devotion of a female chief who ruled the Nilharnies, the owners of the trading village which was the rendezvous. Campbell, in his journal, speaks in the most glowing terms of the fine character



VIEW ON THE UPPER STIKINE

of this Amazon of the mountains, whose humanity proved his shield in trying times. In the year following his escape, Trader Campbell was compelled to leave his station on Dease's Lake, and his fort was burnt by the irreconcilable Indians. The explorer, however, was greatly satisfied when some time after he received from Sir George Simpson, in answer to his report, word to the effect that the Governor and Council had expressed their entire satisfaction with his energetic action and shrewd management. In Sir George Simpson's Book, "A Journey Round the World" (1847) full credit is given to Campbell for his courage and faithfulness.

The favorable message from the Governor but urged on the youthful explorer to new fields of discovery. In going to Dease's Lake Campbell had taken the more southerly of the mountain affluents making up the Upper Liard River. Under a new order he started in 1840 to explore the northern branch of the Liard. For this purpose he left Fort Halkett, his mountain rendezvous, in May, and journeyed northward, thinking that perhaps, though starting below  $60^{\circ}$  N, he might come upon the river discovered by Dease and Simpson two years before, running into the Arctic ocean about  $70^{\circ}$  N. and called by them the



DEASE'S LAKE POST

Colville. Ascending the mountain gorge through which the swift Liard flows Campbell came to a beautiful lake, to which, in honor of Lady Simpson, he gave the name Lake Frances. The lake was divided by a promontory called by him "Simpson's Tower," and leaving the lake he ascended one of its tributaries, clambering along its rocky banks, which in turn came from a small mountain reservoir called by him Finlayson's Lake, as its affluent was also named. This lake at high water gives one part of its waters to the Pacific and the other to the Arctic ocean. Campbell, with the hardiest of his seven trusty companions, who were some of them whites and others Indians, now made an

inland journey of more than a day's march, and saw the high cliffs of the splendid river, which were named the Pelly Banks in honor of the Governor in London, Sir Henry Pelly. The Hudson's Bay Company would have called it Campbell River, but the unassuming explorer refused the honor. On reaching the stream the party made a raft and drifted a few miles down, far enough to see the magnitude of the river. On their return to Lake Frances they found that their companions had erected a house at Simpson's Tower, and the explorer called this, in honor



INDIANS AT LA MONTAIGNE'S POST, LIARD RIVER

of his birthplace, "Glenlyon House." Returning with his full party, Campbell reached Fort Halkett, having been absent four months.

### THE GREAT EXPEDITION.

The result of Campbell's successful discovery was an order from Sir George Simpson to establish a trading post at the source of the Liard. This was accomplished, and a post erected at Frances Lake in 1841. In the following year birch bark was brought up the river from Fort Liard, and sent during the

winter by dog sleighs to Pelly Banks. Here in 1843 an establishment was erected and arrangements made for descending the river by means of the canoe built at Pelly Banks. We give the story of the commencement of his great voyage on the river in the words of the veteran explorer :

“Early in June, 1843, I left Frances Lake with some of the men. We walked over the mountains to the Pelly Banks, and shortly after started down stream in the canoe with the interpreter Hoole, two French Canadians and three Indians. As we advanced the river increased in size and the scenery formed a succession of picturesque landscapes. About twenty-five miles from Pelly Banks we encountered a bad rapid—Hoole’s—where we were forced to disembark everything. Elsewhere we had a nice flowing current. Ranges of mountains flanked us on both sides; on the right the mountains were generally covered with wood; the left range was more open, with patches of green poplar running up its valleys and burn-sides, reminding one of the green brae-face of the Highland glens.”

### BAD INDIANS.

The beauty of the scenery and the joy of the explorers as they floated down the enlarging Pelly cannot be described. But their day-dream was rudely interrupted. They had reached the juncture of the Pelly with the Lewis, as they called the new found stream, and this was 400 or 500 miles from Pelly Banks. Here, at the spot where afterwards Fort Selkirk was erected, was encamped a band of “Wood Indians.” This being the first band of explorers down the Pelly, the Indians had never seen white men before. The savages spoke loud, seemed wild and distant, and although they smoked the pipe of peace yet were not to be depended upon. It was the intention of Campbell to proceed further down the stream, but his hosts would not hear of it. They depicted the dangers of the route, spoke of the Indians of the lower river as being very treacherous, said they were “numerous as the sand,” and “would not only kill but eat the white man.” Campbell’s men, alarmed by these tales, which were only too true, would go no further; and so throwing a sealed

can into the river with word of his voyage, he turned his prow up stream again. No sooner had Campbell started back than the Indians, showing greater hostility, stealthily followed the party, and were very nearly falling upon the small band of voyageurs. Two years afterwards the Indians informed Campbell that they had intended to murder him and his crew. They depicted very vividly how on one night when it was as clear as day he had himself, while on guard, kept in his hand something white. This had been a book, a religious work, of which he was fond—"Hervey's Meditations,"—some say it was the Bible. This little book they had regarded as a charm, and it saved his life. They told him that he had occasionally gone to the river brink to drink, but that he drank from a horn cup. Had he knelt down to drink they would certainly have killed him and thrown him into the river. Campbell was in his religious spirit in the habit of attributing his safety on this occasion to the special care of his Heavenly Father.

### DOWN THE PELLY.

The misadventure of the first voyage did not deter the daring fur traders from seeking out the river again. The winters were spent in trading between Frances Lake and Pelly Banks, but in the summer, parties descended the river on hunting expeditions, and brought back many a quarry of moose, deer and bear, and supplies of the bighorns or mountain sheep, noted for the delicacy of their flesh. The constant visits made to Pelly banks led to much speculation as to what the outlet of the Pelly River was. Was it the Colville? Or was it, as Campbell with true prescience conjectured, the upper part of the Yukon? It was at length determined to place a fort at the junction of the Pelly and Lewis, the point reached on a former journey a few years before.

Having spent the winter before in building boats at Pelly Banks, they sent their returns in early spring down to Fort Simpson, and in July, 1848, started off with great expectation to take possession of new territory. Reaching the junction of the Pelly and Lewis they erected a fort, calling it Fort Selkirk.

In this there was a remarkable example of the modesty of the explorer. It was said that the head officer of the Company in writing to him called the fort Campbell's Fort, but the sturdy trader maintained that he knew no such fort, and insisted upon calling his post Fort Selkirk. For many years the fort, which now lies in ruins, was known in the region as "Campbell's Fort."

### IT IS THE YUKON!

While the ardent explorers, along the west of the mountains, had been thus doing their work, another movement was



PEEL'S RIVER POST (Fort McPherson)

taking place down the Mackenzie river. That fine navigable river was descended from Fort Simpson, and its mouth reached on the Arctic ocean. One of the rivers flowing into the delta is the Peel. Going up this a short distance, the traders had come to a point where, by a portage of ninety miles, they were able to reach the Porcupine river, and descending this they came upon the grand river of Alaska, the Yukon. Thus reaching the junction of the Porcupine and Yukon in 1847, the Hudson's Bay Company's trader, A. H. Murray, erected Fort Yukon, and entered upon the fur trade of the Company. This advance movement of the Company had been encouraged by the

leasing some eight years before of the strip from  $54^{\circ} 40'$  on the coast up to Mount St. Elias by the Russians to the Hudson's Bay Company.

In 1850 Campbell obtained permission from Sir George Simpson to descend the river from Fort Selkirk, confident that he would find it to be the Yukon. Accomplishing a journey from the height of land of about 1,200 miles, Campbell proved his surmise correct. From Fort Yukon he ascended the Porcupine in company with Murray, crossed on foot to the Peel river and thence ascending the Mackenzie reached Fort Simpson. He



FORT GOOD HOPE (Mackenzie River)

refers with great glee to the surprise of his friends seeing him return to the fort up the Mackenzie instead of down the Liard, as he had been wont to come. The difficulty of the Liard route may be seen from the fact that the regular Hudson's Bay Com-route for transporting the Pelly river furs was by way of the Yukon, Porcupine and up the Mackenzie river.

Campbell, on reaching the junction of the Pelly and Lewis, built his fort, and for a short time it promised to be an important centre, but in 1852 a thieving band of coast Indians, called the Chilkats, made a raid upon Fort Selkirk, plundered and shortly afterwards destroyed it, so that to this day ruins may be seen

at the junction of the the rivers mentioned. After this destruction, Campbell made one of the most marvellous journeys on record, walking the whole distance from Fort Simpson to Fort Garry on snowshoes, which is not less than 2,000 miles. He then pushed on on foot to Red Wing, Minnesota.

### LATER LIFE.

In 1853, Campbell visited England, and there, under his direction, maps were prepared by Arrowsmith of the region explored by him. To few men has been vouchsafed the privilege of naming the important points in so large a region as Campbell thus described. The rivers and more notable points were named by him after his own acquaintances in the Company, or from the places in his native valley in Perthshire. Such names as McMillan, Lewis, White and Stewart, given to large tributaries of the Yukon, are illustrations of this. Much indignation was aroused a few years ago by a worthless subaltern in the United States Army, Lieut. Schwatka, attempting, after going over Campbell's ground, to rename the places fixed in Arrowsmith's map years before by our explorer.

After returning from Scotland, Campbell was sent back to the Athabasca district, where he remained till 1863. During the latter part of this time his lonely abode was made joyful by the arrival of a brave Scottish lady, Miss Eleonora Sterling, who came in company with her sister, but otherwise unattended, all the way from Scotland to be his bride. The late Consul Taylor used to describe with great animation this heroic journey of the Scottish lassies whom he had seen, as they made their overland journey from St. Paul to Fort Garry of upwards of 400 miles, and then courageously pushed on to go 400 miles further north to Norway House to be met by Campbell from his far off post in Athabasca. Robert Campbell was most devoted to his wife, and she gave him two sons and a daughter. The writer well remembers him in 1871, when he had received a few weeks before the news of the death of his wife, who had gone home to Edinburgh. The old fur trader seemed as if he were in a dream, dwelling on the terrible loss he had sustained.

After remaining his full term in Athabasca, Campbell removed east on his appointment to the charge of the Swan River district. Here he was in charge till 1871, when he retired from the service with the rank of Chief Factor. His children were educated in Edinburgh, and he spent the time in coming and going from the land of his birth to the western land where he had seen so many adventures. In 1880, he took up land in Riding Mountain, Manitoba, erected buildings upon it, and to this home gave the name Merchiston Ranch. It was his delight to come down once or twice a year to Winnipeg, attend to necessary business and spend a few weeks meeting old friends and recalling old times. This was his life till May 9th, 1894, when he passed away after a short illness at the ripe age of 86 years and a few months. He was buried at Kildonan, a large company of old friends following him to his tomb.

### OUR ESTIMATE.

As we examine his life and recall his character, we are impelled to give an estimate of our old friend, Robert Campbell :

(1) He was a man cast in an heroic mould. His bravery, decision of character, honesty of purpose, and devotion to duty stand out prominently during the period of nearly 40 years in which he served the Hudson's Bay Company.

(2) His deeply religious nature maintained its fervor and devotion during the long period of service among heathen savages in the far west, and among scenes of competitive trade and at times debauchery and even bloodshed. It was his delight in earlier days to pay visits to Kildonan, and in his later years to the Church of his fathers in Winnipeg. He was a friend of all good men, and was a man of singular modesty.

(3) Though marrying somewhat late, he was exceedingly domestic in his habits and was intensely devoted to his wife and children. His success as a fur trader was recognized by his company; he was always a favorite of Sir George Simpson; and he was singularly free of the arts by which subordinates seek to ingratiate themselves with their superiors.

(4) His work as an explorer gave him his highest distinc-

tion. To this his ardent Highland nature gave him a bias ; the love of adventure was strong in him ; he laughed at dangers which would have deterred other men. He had a great faculty of managing Indians ; and was highly regarded by them. The glory of being the discoverer of the Upper Yukon, the river of golden sands, will ever be his.

(5) He was an ornament to the Hudson's Bay Company's service, which retained a high standard among its officers. It affords the writer pleasure to testify, having had a large acquaintance with the officers and men of the Company, that few, if any, bodies have ever retained a higher standard of honor, honesty and respectability, among their men than the old Company of 250 years standing, which preserved peace among the wandering tribes of Indians, kept the British flag flying from Lake Superior to the Pacific Ocean, and worthily earned the title of the Honorable the Hudson's Bay Company.

### A VOTE OF THANKS

Mr. K. N. L. McDonald, who had been in the service of the Hudson's Bay Company and had traded in the Liard and Stikine river districts, and also on the Yukon, Porcupine and McKenzie Rivers, moved a vote of thanks to Dr. Bryce for his ably prepared and interesting paper on the life and work of the late Robert Campbell of the H. B. Co.'s service. This was seconded by the Rev. Canon Coombes, and unanimously carried. Mr. McDonald spoke of the feelings of loyalty he experienced on his passing the site of old Dease Post on Dease Lake in 1887, a post established by Mr. Campbell in 1838 and abandoned so soon by him. His admiration for one of the most intrepid explorers of the North-West of this country, led him to empty his Winchester repeating rifle of her 15 charges as a tribute of honor and respect. He further alluded to his having discovered some old papers which Mr. Campbell had given to some Indians in the winter of 1838 and 1839. These Indians had evidently considered these papers of some value, for they very carefully put them in the inside of birch bark, neatly tied up with sinew, and left them in charge of a Mr. Callbreath at Telegraph Creek. He was fortunate enough

to secure these papers. The first two were simply receipts of some dried meat and fish, but the third one was unique in its way and suggestive. It read in this manner: "This old scoundrel wishes me to give him a certificate of character. He has been trying to starve and murder me all winter.—Robert Campbell." These papers were sent to Mr. Campbell, and it was amusing to find some time afterwards that, at a banquet given to him in Montreal, it was reported that these papers were found by Mr. Chief Factor McFarlane on the Skeena River.

Lieutenant Schwatka, commissioned by the U. S. Govern-



ABANDONED POST (Toad River, Liard)

ment, went over what is now known as the Dyea Pass, descended the Lewis River to its junction with the Pelly at Fort Selkirk, and thence on to the coast. He ignored the names of places given by Mr. Campbell years before, and in his book coolly alluded to Mr. Campbell in these words: "A man named Campbell is said to have passed here some years ago."

Mr. Campbell in his travels and explorations had not a better instrument than a pocket compass to enable him to take observations, and as an evidence of his accuracy, it may be stated that the map produced from his notes and delineations by Mr. Arrowsmith, London, England, varies but little from the best

maps we have to-day by the Canadian and U. S. Governments.

Mr. Campbell was not only an intrepid explorer and indefatigable traveller, but he was as well a man of deep, strong religious convictions, and to show his sympathy for the Indians of the Yukon Valley he in his will gave \$1,000 to the mission work out there, of which my brother, Archdeacon McDonald, had charge for many years.

Mr. Campbell established Fort Selkirk in 1848. This post was pillaged by the Chilkat Indians in 1852, and was burned down in 1853. Mr. Campbell, in the autumn of 1852, came up to Fort Simpson, at the mouth of the Liard river, and in the winter of 1852 and 1853 walked out on snowshoes to Fort Garry, now Winnipeg, as mentioned in the paper.

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NOTE—Dr. Bryce wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mr. C. C. Chipman, Commissioner of the Hudson's Bay Company at Winnipeg, for the use of the views from which the illustrations of this paper are made.





